

Going global

Recently, Metropolitan Stefan Soroka called upon the clergy of the four eparchies of our Church in the United States to come together for a retreat. A number of priests from the St. Nicholas Eparchy heeded +Stefan's call and made the trek to Hershey, PA for the event. We were lured not only by dreams of chocolate, but also by the preaching of +Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Ukrainian Catholic Bishop of Argentina.

+Sviatoslav immediately set out to wake us from our travel-induced torpor. In front of the gathered throng, he declared the Ukrainian Catholic Church to be a global Church, and he challenged us to break the fetters which we impose upon the Gospel by our ghetto mentality. Gulp! Did he really say that? Yes indeed, and he did even more: he incarnated the words by his presence and actions. You see, though Ukrainian-born, +Sviatoslav has mastered not only English, but Italian and Spanish as well. (I even threw a bit of French at him, and he didn't even flinch!) Moreover, he stood before a clergy which itself reflected the global nature of our Church: among our number were those born in Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Germany, Brazil, Canada and – gasp! – there were even a few native-born Americans.

Perhaps boldest of all, +Sviatoslav chose to address Ukrainian Catholic clergy in the local language – i.e., English – rather than the expected Old World Ukrainian. (As you can well imagine, grumbling ensued!) In so doing, +Sviatoslav recognized one of the fundamental characteristics of Byzantine “ecclesiology” – i.e., Church structure. Our ecclesiology differs from the conventional view commonly held by Roman Catholics, who often see the “locus” of the Church to be Rome, with the fullness of the Church emanating from there – which, by the way, is why they keep asking us if we are “under Rome”, as if we were expected to be a branch office. We Byzantines, on the other hand, consider the local worshiping community to be the “locus” of the Church: the “fullness of the Church” exists at the local level and then builds upward, forming eparchies and metropolias and patriarchates and the Universal Catholic Communion as communities “embrace one another in love”. By addressing the clergy in English, +Sviatoslav recognized that the fullness of the Ukrainian Catholic Church exists just as much here on American soil as in Ukraine. He even suggested – horrors! – that we might do away with the word “diaspora”.

What comes to mind is something that I learned in a class on Medieval France at Middlebury College in Vermont. As you can well imagine, there were few maps in Medieval Europe, where people had too much trouble just surviving to worry about detailed cartography. So how did they keep track of things like kingdoms and borders? Easy: settlements such as villages and towns were considered to be part of one political entity or another and, as such, turned inward toward their “compatriots” who held the same allegiance – with the consequence that they “turned their backs” on those who did not belong. Being American-born, I have been shown enough scornful backs to suspect that the same phenomenon happens within our Church. I could be accused of insensitivity were I to suggest that the Ukrainian-born have never experienced scornful backs aimed at them as well. Heaven forbid!

None of this, of course, is in keeping with the tenets of our faith. Didn't Jesus tell the apostles to "go forth and teach all nations, baptizing them..."? Didn't St. Paul try to put an end to prejudice, saying that there should be "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but all one in Christ Jesus"? Our Church can live only when we "embrace in love" all those whom Christ, for His own inscrutable reasons, chooses to put into our company.

Only Divine Love - not only coming to us, but also going through us to others - can transform us into the credible icon of Christ which God intends the Church to be. When outsiders look at us, is this indeed how they see us? A French hymn asks "When the Lord appears, will He find in the world people who are strong in the faith, and whose love responds to His own?" This might be a worthwhile reflection for us as we begin the St. Philip's pre-Christmas fast next month.

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op